DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 227 720 FL 013 606

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TITLE Referential Strategies in the Narratives of Japanese Children.
PUB DATE Oct 82
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development (7th, Boston, MA, October 8-10, 1982).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Language; Discourse Analysis; *Japanese; Language Research; *Language Skills; *Narration; Psycholinguistics; *Story Telling; *Verbal Development
IDENTIFIERS *Referents (Linguistics)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the referential strategies used by Japanese children and adults in two story telling tasks focusing upon the following discourse contexts: (1) first mentions of story characters, (2) references in subject position to the same character, and (3) references to another character. The subjects, 60 children and 10 adults, were interviewed and asked to tell the story of a set of cartoons and a 7-minute color videotape. The children differentiated the three discourse contexts, although not as strongly as the adults. Both children and adults used nominal reference for first mentions of story characters. Developmental trends showed up especially in the contexts calling for explicit nominal reference, first mentions, and switch subjects. In the children's narratives, a less frequent use of nominal first references was found in the three younger groups. Examination of the data leads to the conclusion that differences in children's referential choices can be understood by considering the nature of the context and the child's relationship to the referent in each case. It would seem that their referential choices are based on their own relationship to the referent, that they ignore the listener's needs, and that they master the skill of introducing referents recalled from memory during their fourth year. (AMH)

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Referential Strategies in the Narratives of Japanese Children

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In order to produce a successful narrative, one of the many skills which children must acquire is the ability to refer to story characters in a way which identifies them adequately for the listener. In The Language and Thought of the Child (1926), Piaget attributes the overuse of pronouns in story retellings to the egocentrism of children under about seven years of age. Since then, referential problems in children's narratives have frequently been noted (e.g. Mandler and Johnson 1975, Menig-Peterson 1973), but with the exception of Karmiloff-Smith's recent work (1982), there is as yet little detailed information on the development of referential skills in storytelling, especially in the non-Indo-European languages. In this paper, I will examine the referential strategies used by Japanese children and adults in two storytelling tasks, focusing upon three discourse contexts: first mentions of story characters, references in subject position to the same character referred to by the immediately prior main clause subject, and subject references to a different character from the prior subject, that is, switch reference.

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These three discourse contexts were chosen because prior research on the narratives of Japanese adults (Clancy, 1980) indicated that different referential choices were made in each case. In colloquial Japanese, third person pronouns are extremely rare and tend to imply a personal relationship between the speaker and the referent. The typical Japanese equivalent of pronominalization is ellipsis, or non-mention. Since there is no marking of person, number, or gender on Japanese verbs, the identity of an ellipted referent must be deduced entirely from the linguistic or non-linguistic context. Thus the Japanese narrator usually

has two choices: explicit reference with a noun phrase or inexplicit reference with ellipsis. For purposes of the present paper, nominal reference will include both proper names of story characters and descriptive noun phrases.

In adult Japanese discourse, the basis for choosing between nominal reference and ellipsis is, presumably, the speaker's distinction between "given" and "new" information. According to Chafe (1976), "given" information is "that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the time of the utterance." New information, in contrast, is information which the speaker assumes he is presently "activating" or "re-activating" in the hearer's consciousnesss. In this light, each of the three discourse contexts to be considered here differs in the degree to which explicit reference is required: for first mentions of story characters, explicit reference is always necessary; for switch reference, a noun phrase will be necessary to avoid ambiguity unless the prior context clarifies the identity of the referent; and for same subject references, which are "given" by the prior clause, explicit reference is not necessary. In this account, it is the speaker's assumptions about the listener's state of knowledge with respect to the referent which determine which referential form will be chosen. If this is the basis of children's referential choices as well, then at least within a Piagetian framework, we would not expect children to use nominal reference where appropriate before about seven years of age.

Subjects and Method

The subjects for this study were 60 Japanese children in six different age groups and 10 adults. Two types of materials were used to elicit narratives from these subjects: a set of seven picture cartoons, each consisting of from five to nine frames linked together in plastic covers, and a seven-minute color videotape, which was a segment from a popular television series. The ages and number of subjects who performed each task are given on number (1) of the handout. With

some prompting at first, all the children within this age range were able to tell several cartoon stories. However, telling the story of the videotape from memory was much more difficult, and as the table shows, only seven of the children under five years of age were able to produce enough independent, unprompted narration to include their stories in the analysis.

Each subject was interviewed individually by two young Japanese women, one who primarily elicited the narratives, the other who served as the listener. Stories based on the cartoon picture sets were elicited first. The task was presented as a game in which the child would tell the story to the listener, who covered her eyes during narration. First, the elicitor showed the child a card depicting the four little children who were the main characters in the cartoon stories, and told the child each character's name. Before each cartoon story, the elicitor told the child the names of the characters to appear, pointing at the card. The cartoon set was then spread out on a table in front of the child and elicitor, and the child was asked to tell the story to the listener, who sat on the other side of the table.

After going through the cartoon sets one by one, the child was shown the videotape. The listener would say that she had to leave for a while, and the child was asked to tell her the story when she came back, after watching the videotape with the elicitor. Essentially the same procedure was followed with the adults, except that the listener did not cover her eyes during the cartoon series; it was felt that this would be too unnatural, perhaps encouraging them to talk like children.

First Mentions

The most obvious difference between adult and child first mentions of story characters was that many of the children plunged into narration with no explicit mention of any referents. Number (2) on the handout, narrated by a girl of

three years, 11 months, is typical. Even the first references to each story character are elliptical. As the last line of this example shows, there was a tendency for the children in the three youngest groups to use ellipsis for the first mention of main characters, but to provide an explicit nominal reference when a peripheral character entered the plot. Number (3) on the handout presents the average frequency of ellipsis for main vs. peripheral characters on the cartoon task; a similar trend appeared on the video task as well.

This finding suggests that the children's choice of referential form for first mentions may have been based, not upon the listener's point of view with respect to old vs. new information, but rather upon their own. The main characters in the stories had been introduced to the children at the beginning of the task, and were established in the plot by the time any peripheral characters appeared. Thus the peripheral characters, such as the teacher in number (2), were "new" to the child narrator as well as the listener, and this may have been the real motivation for the use of nominal reference in these cases.

Another contributing factor may be that in adult Japanese discourse, referential strategies are based partly upon the status of a referent as a main or peripheral character. Ellipsis will often be reserved for the hero, with nominal reference being used for less important characters (Clancy 1980). It is possible that children are familiar with this pattern, (this is supported by their treatment of switch reference for story heroes), but extend the use of ellipsis for the story hero to introductions. Thus the use of nominal introductions for peripheral characters may be based partly upon children's understanding of plot centrality.

Switch Reference Subjects

Once a referent has been introduced into a story, it may not always be necessary to refer to that character explicitly, even after other characters

have also been mentioned, since the preceding narration will build up expectations about which character is likely to perform which action. In changing the subject referent after introduction in these narratives, adults used explicit nominal reference approximately 65% of the time, averaging performance on both tasks. In the adult narratives, such cases of elliptical switch reference are rarely ambiguous, since a wide range of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors disambiguate reference at these points.

The cartoon stories used in this study included ones designed to elicit switch reference in a variety of discourse situations, such as a return of focus to the story hero after a brief interruption by a peripheral character, a shift of focus between two equally important characters, etc. Number (4) on the handout describes one cartoon used to elicit switch reference; here I will focus on the point at which subject reference switches from Yukichan to Satchan at frame 6 or 7. Number (5) on the reverse side of the handout gives the number of subjects who chose ellipsis or nominal reference in each age group. The third column notes the number of subjects who did not include the relevant frames in their story or did not mention Satchan at this point.

As the table shows, the use of ellipsis for switch reference in this case is common among the three year olds, but declines thereafter. A consistent finding across different stories was that some of the three and four year olds simply avoided switch reference contexts, either by omitting entire event sequences, or by narrating only the actions of one character. None of the adults used ellipsis at this point, and most of the children over 5 handled switch reference in this case in the adult pattern.

Where does the child's use of noun phrases for switch reference come from? Although the common explanation of adult usage emphasizes the listener's need for clarity at these points, acquisition of strategies for switch reference may

reflect, to some extent, the child's own focusing and attentional mechanisms. During the course of narration, as the child's attention shifts to a new character, the shift in mental imagery in the case of the video task, or the visual shift in the figure being fixated upon in the cartoon task, may be the real basis for the treatment of a switch referent as "new". Again, children may be basing their referential choices upon whether a referent is new or old information from their own point of view.

Same Reference Subjects

When the same subject referent is preserved from the preceding main clause, the most common referential choice in Japanese is ellipsis. Several cartoons included sequences of frames in which a single story character performed a series of activities which were designed to elicit a shift to ellipsis following the first mention. For example, in one cartoon, Yuk'chan is shown seasoning rice in the first frame, shaping it into rice balls in the second frame, and putting them into a lunch bag in the third frame. Number (6) on the handout shows the referential choices made in this context. The first column gives the number of subjects at each age who used ellipsis for both their first and second mention of Yukichan, and the second column shows shifts from nominal first mentions to ellipsis, the adult pattern. Only two subjects, noted in the third column, used nominal reference for both first and second mentions. The last column gives the number of subjects who did not mention Yukichan twice or did not include the relevant second or third frame in their stories.

As the chart shows, by far the most common choice for the second mention of a referent was ellipsis. Many of the 3 and 4 year olds used ellipsis for their first mention as well, but the adult pattern is already present in the stories of almost half of these children, and is used by most children from 5 years, 8 months of age. Ignoring the treatment of first mentions, it is clear

that the use of ellipsis for same subjects is established by most children even at the lower end of this age range.

This makes sense when we consider that the same subject referents constitute "given" information for both the child narrator and the listener; in this case there is no difference between their points of view. Moreover, ellipsis is the most common form of reference in Japanese narrative discourse, since typically a particular referent will be mentioned repeatedly. From a developmental perspective as well, ellipsis constitutes the unmarked option; shared information is left unexpressed from the earliest stages of Japanese language acquisition. It is the appropriate use of nominal reference, rather than of ellipsis, which must be learned by the young Japanese child.

Context Differentiation

Although the children did not differentiate the three discourse contexts as strongly as the adults did, most of the children in this sample did tend to make different referential choices in each of the contexts. Number (7) on the handout presents the average frequency of nominal reference in each context. Clearly, both children and adults tended to use nominal reference most frequently for first mentions of story characters, least frequently for same subject referents, and with intermediate frequency for switch subject referents. Developmental trends are apparent, especially in the two discourse contexts calling for explicit nominal reference, first mentions and switch subjects. On the cartoon task, there is a gradual developmental progression toward the adult frequency of nominal reference for both first mentions and switch subjects, with the children under 5 using nominal reference much less frequently than the adults. Adult frequencies of nominal reference are reached much earlier on the video task, but again, the children under five years old used the lowest rates of nominal reference, especially for switch subjects. Clearly, it was easiest for the children to deal with

same subject referents, which need not be explicitly specified.

Preliminary analysis of individual strategies indicates that the children first distinguish between first mentions and same subjects, the most strongly differentiated pair of contexts in the adult narratives. Switch subjects were more difficult to differentiate. There were children in each age group of the sample who failed to distinguish between switch subjects and first mentions, both of which call for explicit reference, or between switch and same subjects, both of which involve characters already established in the story line. It is also important to note that the adult model for switch reference is much more variable than for first mentions or same subjects, and the reasons underlying selection of ellipsis or nominal reference in any particular case are less obvious, including a wide range of factors, such as the presence of disambiguating adverbials or explicit non-subject references.

Task Differences

As number (7) on the handout shows, there were striking differences between the referential choices made by both the children and the adults on the two tasks. The adults invariably used nominal reference for first mentions, but used a higher frequency of nominal reference for both same and switch subjects on the cartoon task. In Japanese, repeated nominal reference to the same subject may mark a discourse boundary, and it appears that the segmented nature of the frame-by-frame cartoon stories elicited a higher frequency of nominal reference for same subjects, by creating so many potential discourse boundaries. For switch subjects, the adults used nominal reference on the video task much less frequently, because these narratives were much longer than the cartoon stories. This made it possible to build up richer expectations about which characters were likely subjects of which predicates, and allowed for many more temporal/causal action sequences and dialogues in which elliptical switch reference was unambiguous.

In the children's narratives, the major difference between the tasks was a much less frequent use of nominal first mentions on the cartoon task, especially among the three youngest groups. Another important difference was the use of deictic nominal references such as kono hito 'this person' for both first mentions and switch references on the cartoon task, but not the video task. This was very common among the children under five years of age, half of whom used such deictic references. In contrast, of the 40 children over five years old, only four used deictic references. The use of such deictics was especially striking since the elicitor had been instructed to direct the child's attention to the listener, and whenever a child began to address his story to the elicitor, she would remind him to tell the story to the listener, and point out that the listener could not see the cartoons. The younger children would then look directly at the listener, who had her hands over her eyes, and pointing emphatically at the picture of the referent in question, continue their story with kono hito 'this person'.

These differences in the children's referential choices can be understood by considering the nature of the context and the child's relationship to the referent in each case. On the cartoon task, the referents were present and visible before the children as they told the story; on the video task the referents were recalled from memory. The results on the cartoon task show that when the referents were present, many children treated them as old information with ellipsis, or introduced them with deictic gestures and expressions. Thus their referential choices were based upon their own relationship to the referent, ignoring the listener's needs.

Introducing referents recalled from memory might seem difficult, but as number (7) shows, even the three year olds were, in general, able to use nominal reference for the first mentions of story characters on the video task. Keenan

and Schieffelin (1976) have discussed the problems which children up to about three years of age experience trying to introduce referents recalled from memory into discourse; the present findings suggest that many children master this skill during their fourth year. It is interesting to note, however, that in this case as well, children may be relying to some extent upon their own relationship to the referent, and upon a referential pattern associated with this particular context, namely, one in which the referent is absent.

The notion that children's referential strategies are based upon their association with particular communicative contexts rather than upon evaluation of the listener's needs is supported by these children's inability to change strategies for the listener's sake. Thus the same child who introduced referents with noun phrases on the video task might use ellipsis or deictic expressions on the cartoon task, even though the listener required explicit reference in both cases. In the typical storybook narration context, the child tells the story to a listener who is also looking at the pictures; pointing and deictics are entirely appropriate. The cartoon task in this study introduced an unusual conflict between the child's relationship to a present referent and that of the listener in a context of face-to-face communication. In this case, in which the children could not rely upon their own point of view with respect to the referent and the typical patterns of reference associated with face-to-face interaction, their first mentions of new referents tended to show the expected egocentrism. If children can achieve adequate reference by associating particular choices with particular contexts, relying partly upon their own relationship to a referent as present or absent, then this would help account for two apparently contradictory findings on the nature of young children's referential communication: their ability to communicate fairly adequately about displaced referents in natural contexts at an early age, but their tendency to

perform egocentrically on novel tasks designed to test their ability to take the listener's point of view. However, it is important to note that this egocentrism was by no means as universal across subjects or even as consistent within the stories of individual children as a Piagetian analysis would predict.

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(1) Subjects.

	Cartoon Task		Video Task	
Ages	Male	Female	Male	Female
3.8-4.0	5	5	2	1
4.4-4.8	5	5	1	3
5.0-5.4	5	5	5	5
5.8-6.0	5	5	5	5
6.4-6.8	5	5	5	5
7.0-7.4	5	5	5	5
Adult	5	5	5	5

		Subject Referent
(2) Osunaba de ne, asonde ta no.	Ø played in the sandbox.	Tarookun and Hiroshikun
Soshite ne, okotte ta no.	Then, Ø got mad.	Tarookun
Soshite ne, funzuketa no.	Then, Ø stepped on (it).	"
Soshite bikkuri shita no.	Then Ø was amazed.	Hiroshikun
Soshite ne, kenka shite ta no.	Then Ø were fighting.	Tarookun and Hiroshikun
Soshite ne, okaasan ga kita no.	Then, the mother came.	teacher

(3) Percentage of Ellipsis for First Mentions of Story Characters

	Main Characters	Peripheral Characters
3.8-4.0	.55	.08
4.4-4.8	.32	.13
5.0-5.4	.24	.05
5.8-6.0	.04	0
6.4-6.8	.07	.07
7.0-7.4	.06	.02
Adult	0	0

(4) A "Switch Reference" Cartoon

Frame	
1	An empty playground.
2	Yukichan and Satchan arrive with their mothers, carrying balloons.
3	Satchan rides on a swing holding her balloon.
4	Yukichan slides down a slide holding her balloon.
5	Yukichan lets go of her balloon and it flies away.
6	Yukichan is looking sad, and Satchan comes over.
7	Satchan gives Yukichan her balloon.

(5) Referential Choices for a Switch Reference Subject (Satchan, frame 6 or 7)

	Ø	NP	not counted
3.8-4.0	5	2	3
4.4-4.8	2	6	2
5.0-5.4	2	8	
5.8-6.0	-	9	1
6.4-6.8	2	8	
7.0-7.4	1	9	
Adult	-	10	

(6) Referential Choices for a "Same" Subject

	Ø → Ø	NP → Ø	NP → NP	not counted
3.8-4.0	3	4	1	2
4.4-4.8	7	3		
5.0-5.4	4	6		
5.8-6.0	1	8		1
6.4-6.8	2	8		
7.0-7.4	1	8	1	
Adult	-	10		

(7) Percentage of Nominal Reference

	Cartoon Task			Video Task		
	Intro	Switch	Same	Intro	Switch	Same
3.8-4.0	.53	.09	.26			
4.4-4.8	.71	.15	.45	.88	.03	.39
5.0-5.4	.62	.15	.62	.92	.12	.56
5.8-6.0	.90	.15	.61	.94	.13	.60
6.4-6.8	.91	.12	.63	.98	.12	.49
7.0-7.4	.92	.19	.71	.94	.20	.69
Adult	1.00	.15	.77	1.00	.07	.52